

ITALIAN PASSION FROM ROSSO FIORENTINO

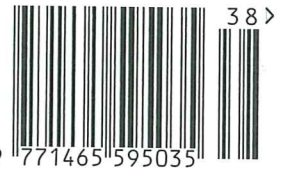
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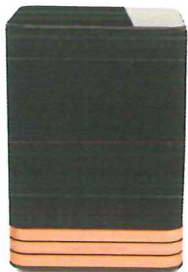


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Sonus faber Venere S floorstanding loudspeakers

by Alan Sircom

Sonus faber's reputation is predicated on elegant loudspeakers made in Italy. The brand's recent Venere models were its first loudspeakers not built in its northern Italian factory. They still look good, represent great value, use clever, state-of-the-art drive units, and sound great, but they don't have just that same beautiful, almost organic finish so beloved in Sonus faber loudspeakers, and that sets them apart from other speaker brands.

Faced with adding a top model in that successful Venere range, Sonus faber decided to go for a 'best of both worlds' option; build a loudspeaker that incorporated the benefits and technologies of the Venere design, but build it by hand in Vicenza. The result is the Venere Signature, more commonly referred to as the Venere S.

Of course, simply assembling a product in the hometown has been done before; a surprising number of 'made in...' products are actually 'final assembly in...', with the bulk of the actual making and assembly performed offshore. This is different – the Venere S utilises the hundreds of man-years spent making high-grade Sonus faber cabinets, assembling a custom cabinet with Venere parts with care, precision, and the kind of fine-tuning and fine-finish that is impossible to find elsewhere.

Of course, simply making a hot-rod version of one of the existing Venere loudspeaker models might look good, and would be an interesting academic exercise to see how much more can be extracted from a loudspeaker due to that fine-tuning process, but instead Sonus faber went back to basics and designed a loudspeaker from scratch that exploited the Venere technology, but brought its own brand of skills to the table, too.

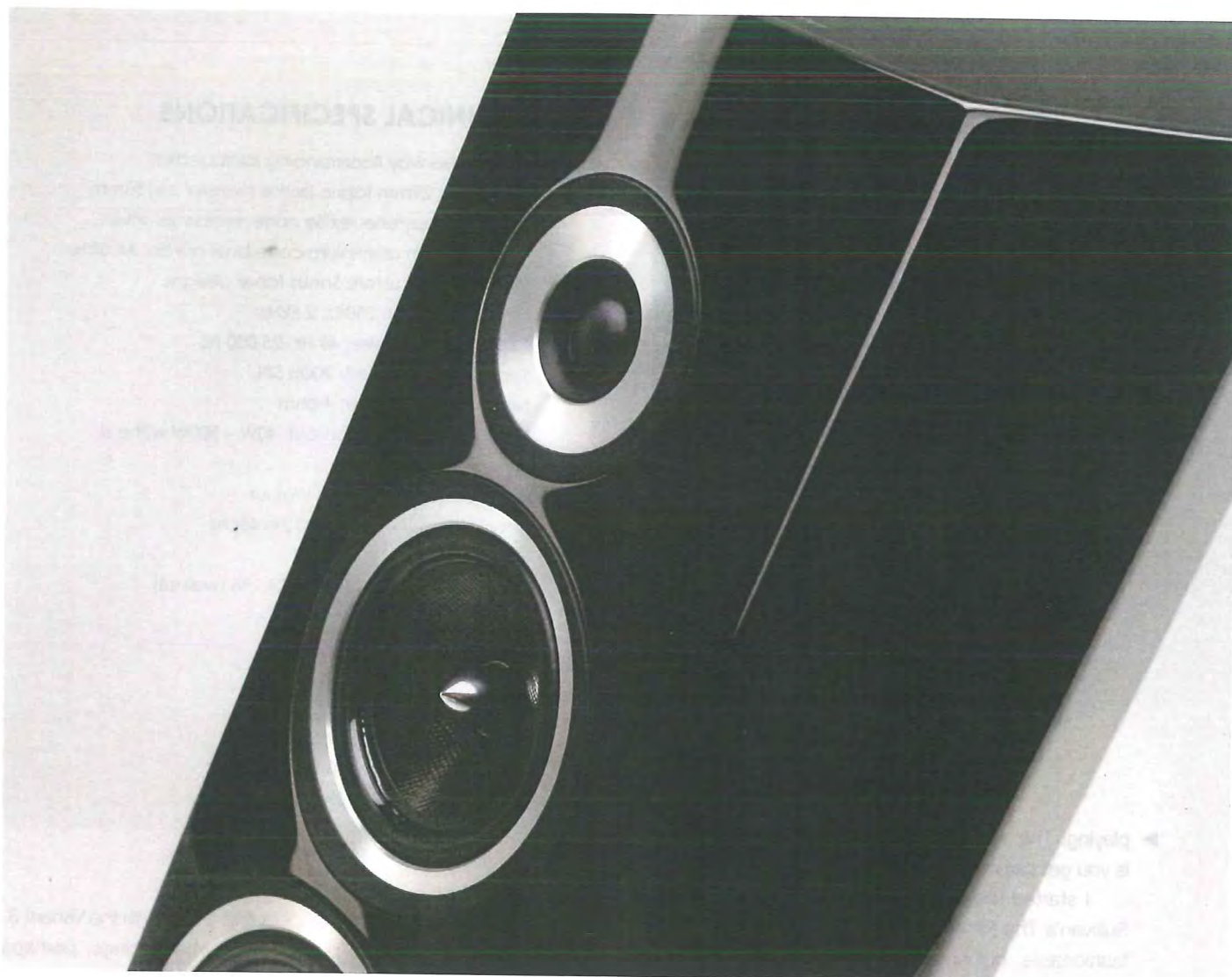
The three-way, five driver Venere S effectively starts where the Venere 3.0 floorstander left off, adding an extra bass driver to the mix. This means there are now three 180mm aluminium-cone bass units, a single 150mm 'Curv' (a heat-formed polypropylene and textile mix) midrange unit with a phase plug (or a 'coaxial anti-compressor' in Sonus faber parlance), and a visco-elastically decoupled 29mm soft-dome tweeter. The mid and bass units feature technology trickled down from the Olympica range, in the use of die-cast 'free compression' baskets, but the tweeter is unique

to the Venere range, eschewing the 'Arrow Point' damped apex dome design common to the more up-scale ranges. Given the Venere S is priced to fit between the Venere and Olympica ranges, having aspects of design common to both lines seems appropriate and fitting.

The crossover is Sonus faber's own 'progressive slope' design, which is suggested to optimise phase response, and features the brand's 'paracross topology' (a nanotech deposit on the PCB lines) and is housed to minimise resonance. The Venere S crosses over at 250Hz and 2.5kHz.

It's the cabinet that really reflects the benefits of the Venere S' Italian roots. The cabinet seems to pull together the clean lines of the Venere models (no 'string' grilles, but drivers with their mounting points hidden behind brushed metal rings), elements common to all modern Sonus faber designs (a cabinet that is back-swept, boat-tailed, and features curved sides, with a rear-rising top plate), and factored in a level of richness of finish and attention to detail that has long marked out Sonus faber's designs. In the process, Sonus faber has moved from a front-firing narrow port used in the other Venere models, to a downward firing port. This is proving to be a popular choice among designers now, as the engineering used in modern speaker cabinets makes this a near ideal position. Down-firing ports effectively maximise speaker placement without introducing port chuffing sounds; rear-firing ports require greater real estate behind the loudspeaker, while front-firing ports are more flexible and often more audible. This makes the out-rigger metal baseplate mandatory, it means the bottom-firing port must be unobstructed, and the baseplate must be parallel with the floor. In modern houses, this is generally not a problem (unless you are fond of deep shag-pile carpet or rugs, in which case 'modern' to you is about 1968 and you still use the word 'groovy'), but can make installation more challenging in older properties where the floor can be somewhat uneven. In really 'olde worlde' properties, this could mean using a tape measure and getting all four corners of the Venere S level with the floor, rather than using a spirit level placed along the front of the baseplate.

This can make for a slow installation process as the loudspeaker also has a 'magic' point in the room where



the degree of toe-in brings the soundstage to life, and the accuracy of plinth-floor installation transforms the bass. My recommendation is to anchor the toe-in to the optimum soundstage point, then fine-tune the plinth-to-floor distance. I'm normally a 'pragmatism rules' type who is happy with a compromise in installation, but while the Venere S sounds good in that compromise, it is capable of so much more if you really make these two aspects of the installation work for you.

Installation otherwise is straight forward (at least a metre from the rear and side walls) and the 90dB efficient, four-ohm load is untroubling to the kind of amplifiers (valve or solid-state) this speaker is likely to be used with. Yes, the natural partners here are other McIntosh Group electronics (Audio Research, McIntosh, Wadia), but realistically you could use this speaker with almost anything, and it sounded exceptionally good on the end of the Moon ACE tested in this issue. The speaker is

supplied with provision for bi-wiring, but doesn't seem to be too unhappy used in a single-wired context (you may want to replace the metal jumpers with something more in line with your choice of speaker cables, however). Our review sample arrived 'well-travelled' so any concerns about running in were long since passed and the speaker sounded great right out of the boxes. They are big boxes, too!

The sound of the Venere S is just as much a synthesis of Sonus faber sound as the technology is a synthesis of the company's technology. The speaker combines the warmth and richness that remain typical Sonus faber characteristics from the Olympica and Homage lines, with the sense of directness and accuracy found in the Venere. It drips with what could best be described as 'passion' for the music played, or more accurately it invokes that passion in the listener, as you find yourself increasingly carried away with the music you are ▶



TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: Three-way floorstanding loudspeaker.

Drive units: 29mm fabric dome tweeter, 1x150mm polypropylene textile cone midrange driver, 3x180mm aluminium cone bass drivers. All drive units are custom Sonus faber designs.

Crossover points: 250Kz, 2.5kHz

Frequency response: 40 Hz -25.000 Hz

Sensitivity (2.83V/1m): 90db SPL

Nominal impedance: 4 ohm

Suggested amplifier output: 40W – 300W without clipping

Finish: Black, White, and Walnut

Dimensions (WxHxD): 39x124x48cm

Weight: 28.8kg

Price per pair: £3,998 (std), £4,198 (walnut)

Manufactured by: Sonus faber

URL: www.sonusfaber.com

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▶ playing. The sign that the Venere S is doing the right things is you get carried away with almost any musical genre, too.

I started the session off with the overture to Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Pirates of Penzance* [Decca Eloquence] – not fashionable, but entertaining, fun, and a perfect rendition of how good Decca engineers were in the late 1950s. The sense of ambience and the sheer musicianship of the orchestra were apparent from the outset, and you can't help but develop that wry smile that accompanies 19th Century comic opera. The speakers really drew me into the album, and where I normally stop at the overture for reviewing purposes, the presentation was so alive and so much fun, I just listened to the whole thing. This highlighted another aspect of the Venere S' performance – it's vocal articulation. The patter song 'Modern Major-General' (sung here by Peter Pratt) requires both impressive diction on the part of the singer and absolute accuracy on the part of the loudspeaker. Any overhang or coloration and the rapid-fire singing ends up hard to follow, especially the lines "When I have learnt what progress has been made in modern gunnery/When I know more of tactics than a novice in a nunnery," which can sound like the Muppets 'Mahna Mahna' song if not handled properly. Here, the detail, dynamics, resolution, and just plain deft handling of the articulation of the singer is excellent.

It's not just wry comic opera that works with the Venere S. Short of black metal played loud (where things, perhaps unsurprisingly, get a little too shouty), the Sonus faber Venere S simply draws you closer to the music and helps you re-engage with the passion for sound that started you along this audiophile quest. As someone who churns through a lot of audio equipment in the course of the average month, it's easy to get somewhat jaded, and the Venere S' resparking of my musical passion is worth its weight in gold.

A £4,000 loudspeaker might seem a little 'ambitious' in an issue devoted to affordable audio excellence, but in fact it hits all those spots perfectly. The Sonus faber Venere S is materially good value in high-end circles (normally you don't get a box this big and this nicely finished in the high-end world without spending a lot more), it sounds excellent, and the only things that separate it from the best of the best are the extremes of frequency, and a lot more weight. As an introduction to what Sonus faber can do, the Venere models are hard to beat, but as an introduction to what Sonus faber can do when production is brought back to Italy, the Venere S is outstanding and comes highly recommended. +